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TRUE LIBERTY.*

An earnest appeal to all that enter that Liberty. I will read to you a few words from the eighth chapter of St. John? "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on Him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Let us not think, my friends, that there is anything strange about the spectacle which we witness this morning. The only strange thing that there could be about it is that anybody should think that it is strange that men should turn aside for half an hour from their ordinary business pursuits, that they should come from the details of life to inquire in regard to the principles, the everlasting principles and purposes of life; that they should turn aside from those things which are occupying them from day to day and make one single hour in the week consecrated to the service of those great things

* A Monday address to Business Men.

which underlie all life — surely there is nothing very strange. There is nothing more absolutely natural. Every man does it in his own sort of way, in his own choice of time. We have chosen to do it together, on one day of the week during these few weeks which the Christian Church has so largely set apart for special thought and prayer and earnest attempt to approach the God to whom we belong. It is simply as if the stream turned back again to its fountain, that it might refresh itself and make itself strong for the great work that it had to do in watering the fields and turning the wheels of industry. It is simply as if men plodding along over the flat routine of their life chose once in a while to go up into the mountain top, whence they might once in a while look abroad over their life, and understand more fully the way in which they ought to work. These are the principles, these are the pictures which represent that which we have in mind as we come together for a little while each Monday in these few weeks, in order that we may think about things of God and try to realize the depth of our own human life. The first thing that we ought to understand about it is that when we turn aside from life it is only that we go deeper into life. This hour does not stand apart from the rest of the hours of the week, in that we are dealing with things in which the rest of the week

has no concern. He who understands life deeply and fully, understands life truly; he has forever renewed his life; and if there comes into our hearts, in the life which we are living, a perpetual sense that life needs renewal, a richening and refreshing, then it is in order that we may go down into the depths and see what lies at the root of things — things that we are perpetually doing and thinking. It is this that brought us together here: it is that we may open to ourselves some newer, higher life. It is that we may understand the life that we may live, along side of and as a richer development of that life which we are living from day to day, which we have been living during the years of our life. How that idea has haunted men in every period of their existence, how it is haunting you, that there is some higher life which it is possible to live! There has never been a religion that has not started there, lifted up its eyes and seen, afar off, what it was possible for man to do from day to day, in contrast with the things which men immediately and presently are. There is not any moment of the human soul which has not rested upon some great conception that man was a nobler being than he was ordinarily conceiving himself to be; that he was not destined to the things which were ordinarily occupying his life; that he might be living a greater and nobler life.

It is because the Christian Scriptures have laid most earnestly hold of this idea, it is because it was represented not simply in the words which Christ said, but in the very being which Christ was, that we go to them to get the inspiration and the indication, the revelation and the enlightenment which we need. I have read to you these few words in which Christ declares the whole subject, the whole character of which His life is and what His work is about to do, because it seems to me that they strike at once the key-note of that which we want to understand. They let us enter into the full conception of that which the new life which is offered to man really is. There are two conceptions which come to every man when he is entering upon a new life, changing his present life to something that is different from the present life, and being a different sort of creature and living in a different sort of a way. The first way in which it presents itself to him — almost always at the beginning of every religion, perhaps — is in the way of restraint and imprisonment. Man thinks of every change that is to come to him as in the nature of denial of something that he is at the present doing and being, as the laying hold upon himself of some sort of restraint, bringing to him something which says: "I must not do the thing which I am doing. I must lay upon myself restraints,

restrictions, commandments, and prohibitions. I must not let myself be the man that I am." You see how the Old Testament comes before the New Testament, the law ringing from the mountain top with the great denials, the great prohibitions, that come from the mouth of God. "Thou shalt not do this, that, or the other—Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." That is the first conception which comes to a man of the way in which he is to enter upon a new life, of the way in which the denial in his experience is to take effect. It is as if the hands were stretched out in order that fetters might be placed upon them. The man says, "Let some power come that is to hinder me from being this thing that I am." And the whole notion is the notion of imprisonment, restraint. So it is with all civilization. It is perfectly possible for us to represent civilization as compared with barbarism, as accepted by mankind, as a great mass of restrictions and prohibitions that have been laid upon human life, so that the freedom of life has been cast aside, and man has entered into restricted, restrained, and imprisoned condition. So it is with every fulfilment of life. It is possible for a man always to represent it to himself as if it were the restriction, restraint, and prohibition of

his life. The man passes onward into the fuller life which belongs to a man. He merges his selfishness into that richer life which is offered to human kind. He makes himself, instead of a single, selfish man, a man of family; and it is easy enough to consider that marriage and the family life bring immediately restraints and prohibitions. The man may not have the freedom which he used to have. So all development of education, in the first place, offers itself to man, or seems to offer itself to man, as prohibition and imprisonment and restraint. There is no doubt truth in such an idea. We never lose sight of it. No other richer and fuller idea which we come to by and by ever does away with the thought that man's advance means prohibition and self-denial, that in order that man shall become the greater thing he must cease to be the poorer and smaller thing he has been. But yet there is immediately a greater and fuller. When we hear those words of Jesus, we see immediately that not the idea of imprisonment but the idea of liberty, not the idea of restraint but that of setting free, is the idea which is really in His mind when he offers the fullest life to human kind. Have you often thought of how the whole Bible is a Book of Liberty, of how it rings with liberty from beginning to end, of how the great men are the men of liberty, of how the Old

Testament, the great picture which forever shines, is the emancipator, leading forth out of imprisonment the people of God, who were to do the great work of God in the very much larger and freer life in which they were to live? The prophet, the psalmist, are ever preaching and singing about liberty, the enfranchisement of the life of man, that man was not imprisoned in order to fulfil himself, but shall open his life, and every new progress shall be into a new region of existence which he has not touched as yet. When we turn from the Old Testament to the New Testament, how absolutely clear that idea is! Christ is the very embodiment of human liberty. In His own personal life and in everything that He did and said, He was forever uttering the great gospel that man, in order to become his completest, must become his freest, that what a man did when he entered into a new life was to open a new region in which new powers were to find their exercise, in which he was to be able to be and do things which he could not be and do in more restricted life. It is the acceptance of that idea, it seems to me, that makes us true disciples of Christ and of that great gospel, and that transfigures everything. When my friend turns over some new leaf, as we say, and begins to live a new life, what shall we think of him? I learn that he has become a

Christian man, that he is doing something, that he is working in a way and living a life which I have not known before. What is my impression in regard to him? Is not your impression, as you look upon that man, that somehow or other he has entered into a slavery or bondage, that he has taken upon his life restrictions and imprisonments which he did not have before? And you think of him, perhaps, as a man who has done a wise and prudent thing, who has done something that is going to be for his benefit some day in some distant and half-realized world, but as a man who, for the present, has laid a burden and bondage upon his life. That is never the tone of Christ; it is never the tone of the Christian gospel. When a man turns away from his sins and enters into energetic holiness, when a man sacrifices his own self-indulgence and goes forth a pure servant of his God and his fellow-men, there is only one cry in the whole gospel of that man, and that is the cry of freedom. As soon as he can catch that, as soon as I can feel about my friend, who has become a better man, that he has become a larger and not a smaller, a freer and not a more imprisoned man, as soon as I lift up my voice and say that the man is free, then I understand him more fully, and he becomes a revelation to me in the higher and richer life which is possible for me to live.

But think of it for yourselves, for a moment, and ask what freer life really is. Try to give a definition of liberty, and I know not what it can be said to be except something of this kind: Liberty is the fullest opportunity for man to be and do the very best that is possible for him. I know of no definition of liberty, that oldest and dearest phrase of men, and sometimes the vaguest also, except that. It has been perverted, it has been distorted and mystified, but that is what it really means: the fullest opportunity for a man to do and be the very best that is in his personal nature to do and to be. It immediately follows that everything which is necessary for the full realization of a man's life, even though it seems to have the character of restraint for a moment, is really a part of the process of his enfranchisement, is the bringing forth of him to a fuller liberty. You see a man coming forward and offering himself as one of the defenders of his country in his country's need. You see him standing at the door where men are being received as recruits into the army of the country. He wants liberty. He wants to be able to do that which he cannot do in his poor, personal isolation here at home. He wants the badge which will give him the right to go forth and meet the enemies of his country, and he enrolls himself among these men. He makes

himself subject to obligations, duties, and drill. They are a part of his enfranchisement. They are really the breaking of the fetters upon his slavery, the sending him forth into freedom. He is like a bit of iron or steel that lies upon the ground. It lies neglected and perfectly free. You see it is made by the adjustment of the end of it so that it can be set into a great machine and become part of a great working system. But there it lies. Will you call it free? It is bound to be nothing there. It is absolutely separate, and with its own personality distinct and individual and all alone. What is to make that bit of iron a free bit of iron, to let it go forth and do the thing which it was meant to do, but the taking of it and the binding of it at both ends into the structure of which it was made to be a part? It seems to me the binding of a man, — it seems to me that the binding of the iron is not the yielding of its freedom. It is not merely after finding its place within the system that it first achieves its freedom and so joins in the music and partakes of the courses with which the whole enginery is filled. Is not it, then, for the first time a free bit of iron, having accomplished all that it was made to do when it came forth from the forge of the master, who had this purpose in his mind? This, then, is freedom; everything is part of the enfranchisement of a man which

helps to put him in the place where he can live his best. Therefore every duty, every will of God, every commandment of Christ, every self-surrender that a man is called upon to obey or to make — do not think of it as if it were simply a restraint to liberty, but think of it as the very means of freedom, by which we realize the very purpose of God and the fulfilment of our life. It is interesting to see how all that is true in regard to the matter of belief, doctrine, and opinions which we are apt to accept. How strange it very often seems that men go to the Church, or to one another, and say: "Must I believe this doctrine in order that I can enter into the Church?" "Must I believe this doctrine in order that I may be saved?" men say, with a strange sort of notion about what salvation is. How strange it seems, when we really have got our intelligence about us and know what it is to believe! To believe a new truth, if it be really truth and we really believe it, is to have entered into a new region, in which our life shall find a new expansion and a new youth. Therefore, not "Must we believe?" but "May I believe?" is the true cry of the human creature who is seeking for the richest fulfilment of his life, who is working that his whole nature may find its complete expansion and so its completest exercise. We talk a great deal in these days and in this place about a

liberal faith. What is a liberal faith, my friends? It seems to me that by every true meaning of the word, by every true thought of the idea, a liberal faith is a faith that believes much, and not a faith that believes little. The more a man believes, the more liberally he exercises his capacity of faith, the more he sends forth his intelligence into the mysteries of God, the more he understands those things which God chooses to reveal to his creatures, the more liberally he believes. Let yourselves never think that you grow liberal in faith by believing less; always be sure that the true liberality of faith can only come by believing more. It is true, indeed, that as soon as a man becomes eager for belief, for the truth of God and for the mysteries with which God's universe is filled, he becomes all the more critical and careful. He will not any longer, if he were before, be simply greedy of things to believe, so that if any superstition comes offering itself to him he will not gather it in indiscriminately and believe it without evidence, without examination. He becomes all the more critical and careful, the more he becomes assured that belief, and not unbelief, is the true condition of his life. The truth that God has entered into this world in wondrous ways and filled its life with Jesus Christ, the truth that man has a soul and not simply a body, that he has a spiritual

need, that God cares for him and he is to care for himself, that there is an immortal life, and that that which we call faith is but the opening of a gate, the pushing back of a veil, — shall a man believe those things as imprisonments of his nature, and shall it not make him larger? Shall it not be the indulgence of his life when he enters into the great certainties which so are offered to his belief, believing them in his own way? Let us always feel that to accept a new belief is not to build a wall beyond which we cannot pass, but is to open the door to a great fresh, free region, in which our souls are to live. And just so it is when we come to the moral things of life. The man puts aside some sinfulness. He breaks down the wall that has been shutting his soul out of its highest life. He has been a drunkard, and he becomes a sober man. He has been a cheat, and becomes a faithful man. He has been a liar, and becomes a truthful man. He has been a profligate, and he becomes a pure man. What has happened to that man? Shall he simply think of himself as one who has crushed this passion, shut down this part of his life? Shall he simply think of himself as one who has taken a course of self-denial? Nay. It is self-indulgence that a man has really entered upon. It is an indulgence of the deepest part of his own nature, not of his unreal nature. He has risen and shaken himself

like a lion, so that the dust has fallen from his mane, and all the great range of that life which God gave him to live lies before him. This is the everlasting inspiration. This is the illumination. I don't wonder that men refuse to give up evil if it simply seems to them to be giving up the evil way, and no vision opens before them of the thing that they may be and do. I don't wonder that, if the negative, restricting, imprisoning conception of the new life is all that a man gets hold of, he lingers again and again in the old life. But just as soon as the great world opens before him then it is like a prisoner going out of the prison door. Is there no lingering? Does not the baser part of him cling to the old prison, to the ease and the provision for him, to the absence of anxiety and of energy? I think there can hardly be a prisoner who, with any leap of heart, goes out of the prison door, when his term is finished, and does not even look into that black horror where he has been living, cast some lingering, longing look behind. He comes to the exigencies, to the demands of life, to the necessity of making himself once more a true man among his fellow-men. But does he stop? He comes forth, and if there be the soul of a man in him still, he enters into the new life with enthusiasm, and finds the new powers springing in him to their work. And if it be

so with every special duty, then with that great thing which you and I are called upon to do — the total acceptance by our nature of the will of God, the total acceptance by our nature of the mastery of Jesus Christ. Oh! how this world has perverted words and meanings, that the mastery of Jesus Christ should seem to be the imprisonment and not the enfranchisement of the soul! When I bring a flower out of the darkness and set it in the sun, and let the sunlight come streaming down upon it, and the flower knows the sunlight for which it was made and opens its fragrance and beauty; when I take a dark pebble and put it into the stream and let the silver water go coursing down over it and bringing forth the hidden color that was in the bit of stone, opening the nature that is in them, the fl wer and stone rejoice. I can almost hear them sing in the field and in the stream. What then? Shall not man bring his nature out into the fullest illumination, and surprise himself by the things that he might do? Oh! the littleness of the lives that we are living! Oh! the way in which we fail to comprehend, or when we do comprehend, deny to ourselves the bigness of that thing which it is to be a man, to be a child of God! Sometimes it dawns upon us that we can see it opening into the vision of these men and women in the New Testament. Sometimes

there opens to us the picture of this thing that we might be, and then there are truly the trial moments of our life. Then we lift up ourselves and claim our liberty or, dastardly or cowardly, slink back into the sluggish imprisonment in which we have been living. How does all this affect that which we are continually conscious of, urging upon ourselves and upon one another? How does it affect the whole question of a man's sins? Oh! these sins, the things we know so well! As we sit here and stand here one entire hour, as we talk in this sort of way, everybody knows the weaknesses of his own nature, the sins of his own soul. Don't you know it? What shall we think about those sins? It seems to me, my friends, that all this great picture of the liberty into which Christ sets man, in the first place does one thing which we are longing to see done in the world. It takes away the glamour and the splendor from sin. It breaks that spell by which men think that the evil thing is the glorious thing. If the evil thing be that which Christ has told us that the evil thing is — which I have no time to tell you now — if every sin that you do is not simply a stain upon your soul, but is keeping you out from some great and splendid thing which you might do, then is there any sort of splendor and glory about sin? How about the sins that you did when you were

young men? How can you look back upon those sins and think what your life might have been if it had been pure from the beginning, think what you might have been if from the very beginning you had caught sight of what it was to be a man? And then your boy comes along. What are the men in this town doing largely in many and many a house, but letting their boys believe that the sins of their early life are glorious things, except that those things which they did, the base and wretched things that they were doing when they were fifteen and twenty and twenty-five and thirty years old, are the true career of a human nature, are the true entrance into human life? The miserable talk about sowing wild oats, about getting through the necessary conditions of life before a man comes to solemnity! Shame upon any man who, having passed through the sinful conditions and habits and dispositions of his earlier life, has not carried out of them an absolute shame for them, that shall let him say to his boy, by word and by every utterance of his life within the house where he and the boy live together, "Refrain, for they are abominable things!" To get rid of the glamour of sin, to get rid of the idea that it is a glorious thing to be dissipated instead of being concentrated to duty, to get rid of the idea that to be drunken and to be lustful are true and

noble expressions of our abounding human life, to get rid of any idea that sin is aught but imprisonment, is to make those who come after us, and to make ourselves in what of life is left for us, gloriously ambitious for the freedom of purity, for a full entrance into that life over which sin has no dominion. And yet, at the same time, don't you see that while sin thus becomes contemptible when we think about the great illustration of the will of God and Jesus Christ, don't you see how also it puts on a new horror? That which I thought I was doing in the halls of my imprisonment I have really been doing within the possible world of God in which I might have been free. The moment I see what life might have been to me, then any sin becomes dreadful to me. Have you ever thought of how the world has stood in glory and honor before the sinless humanity of Jesus Christ? If any life could prove, if any argument could show on investigation to-day that Jesus did one sin in all his life, that the perfect liberty which was his perfect purity was not absolutely perfect, do you realize what a horror would seem to fall down from the heavens, what a constraint and burden would be laid upon the lives of men, how the gates of men's possibilities would seem to close in upon them? It is because there has been that one life which, because absolutely pure from sin,

was absolutely free; it is because man may look up and see in that life the revelation and possibility of his own; it is because that life, echoing the great cry throughout the world that man everywhere is the son of God, offers the same purity — and so the same freedom — to all mankind; it is for that reason that a man rejoices to cling to, to believe in, however impure his life is, the perfect purity, the sinlessness of the life of Jesus. When you sin, my friends, it is a man that sins, and a man is a child of God; and for a child of God to sin is an awful thing, not simply for the stain that he brings into the divine nature that is in him, but for the life from which it shuts him out, for the liberty which he abandons, for the inthrallment which it lays upon the soul. There is one thing that people say very carelessly that always seems to me to be a dreadful thing for a man to say. They say it when they talk about their lives to one another, and think about their lives to themselves, and by and by very often say it upon their death-bed with the last gasp, as though their entrance into the eternal world had brought them no deeper enlightenment. One wonders what is the revelation that comes to them when they stand upon the borders of the other side and are in the full life and eternity of God. The thing men say is, "I have done the very best I can." It is an awful thing

for a man to say. The man never lived, save he who perfected our humanity, who ever did the very best he could. You dishonor your life, you not simply shut your eyes to certain facts, you not simply say an infinitely absurd and foolish thing, but you dishonor your human life if you say that you have done in any day of your life or in all the days of your life put together, the very best that you could, or been the very best man that you could be. You! what are you? Again I say, The child of God, and this which you have been, what is it? Look over it, see how selfish it has been, see how material it has been, how it has lived in the depths when it might have lived on the heights, see how it has lived in the little narrow range of selfishness when it might have been as broad as all humanity, nay, when it might have been as the God of humanity. Don't dare to say that in any day of your life, or in all your life together, you have done the best that you could. The Pharisee said it when he went up into the temple, and all the world has looked on with mingled pity and scorn at the blindness of the man who stood there and paraded his faithfulness; while all the world has bent with a pity that was near to love, a pity that was full of sympathy because man recognized his condition and experience, for the poor creature grovelling upon the pavement, un-

willing and unable even to look upon the altar, but who, standing afar off, said, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" Whatever else you say, don't say, "I have been the very best I could." That means that you have not merely lived in the rooms of your imprisonment, but that you have been satisfied to count them the only possible rooms of your life, and that the great halls of your liberty have never opened themselves before you. Shall not they open themselves somehow to us to-day, my friends? Shall we not turn away from this hour and go back into our business, into our offices, into the shops, into the crowded streets, bearing new thoughts of the lives that we might live, feeling the fetters on our hands and feet, feeling many things as fetters which we have thought of as the ornament and glory of our life, determined to be unsatisfied forever until these fetters shall be stricken off and we have entered into the full liberty which comes to those alone who are dedicated to the service of God, to the completion of their own nature, to the acceptance of the grace of Christ, and to the attainment of the eternal glory of the spiritual life, first here and then hereafter, never hereafter, it may be, except here and now, certainly here and now, as the immediate, pressing privilege and duty of our lives? So let us stand up on our feet and know ourselves in all the

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richness and in all the awfulness of our human life. Let us know ourselves children of God, and claim the liberty which God has given to every one of his children who will take it. God bless you and give some of you, help some of us, to claim, as we have never claimed before, that freedom with which the Son makes free!

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